

# Wedding Vows

## Here are some tips on combining homebuilding and marriage ... successfully.

BY DON DOWNIE

**I**s your marriage in jeopardy when you decide to start a homebuilt airplane? Yes, it probably is—unless you have an understanding mate. An ironclad work pattern that allows at least one full day a week for the spouse and kids might save a homebuilder's marriage.

There's a standard sick joke in homebuilt aircraft circles that goes something like this: "The homebuilt's FAA airworthiness certificate arrived in the same mail with the initial divorce papers!"

T'ain't funny, McGee. Almost everyone knows that building your own airplane takes an enormous dedication in time, money and concentration. And while there are a few women builders, it is normally the man who has the urge to build his own flying machine and puts a strain on family life.

How does it all work out? What are the pitfalls? Is there any kind of pre-building contract, written or spoken, that will help keep a marriage alive and flourishing during the 2000 to 4000 hours that go into many a finished homebuilt?

When those vows were exchanged to love, honor and whatever, there was no mention about living in wedded bliss with the smelly skeleton of a fiberglass fuselage expanding in the living room. Nor was anything written or spoken about the possibility of sharing one's spouse with a rivet gun and sheets of aluminum, a building jig and the cacophony involved in fabrication of a metal structure. A wooden project has shavings, dust from sanding, the magic aroma of glue and the debris of nails, short ends of plywood and bits and pieces of glass cloth that itch like mad!

There are some advantages to the homebuilt over other reactions to the mid-life crisis. If you're active in airplane building, (1) you probably don't have the time or money to hang out in the bars; (2) you probably don't have the time, money or inclination to chase members of the opposite sex; and (3) your habit of dressing fashionably

has probably changed to wearing a faded, spotted, glue-incrusted pair of overalls or an ancient flightsuit so work-worn that the target in Item 2 above wouldn't be receptive anyhow.

It should help a lot to have sworn to and faithfully upheld a pre-project promise to spend a specified amount of time with the family, completely away from your project. It should also help to have earned or promoted the funds for your homebuilt project so that you have not tapped into the family household money.

Let's acknowledge that building an airplane in your garage, your shop or (heaven forbid) your bedroom isn't neat. But if this is your bag, maybe you can benefit from seeing how others have lived with the problem and ended up both married and flying.

There are homebuilt projects that trigger a divorce and also a few that keep a marriage from getting off the ground in the first place. It was a record construction time for the Falco, according to Alfred P. Scott, president of Sequoia Aircraft Corp., which manufactures the Falco kits. Pawel Kwiecinski needed just 13 months to build and fly his Falco with the aid of two Polish friends. Recounting the record building job, Scott notes, "During construction, Pawel spent so much time on his Falco that he shirked his domestic responsibilities. It cost him a marriage, but not in the usual homebuilt airplane tradition of 'five years, \$20,000 and a divorce.' The lady simply said, 'Marry me or go live with your Falco.' " Apparently the Falco got the nod.

Scott adds, "The single most important piece of advice I can offer is to build the airplane at home, no matter what the problems might be with working in cramped quarters. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough."

Scott recalls the story of one of his builders whose wife didn't like airplanes and didn't understand the project, but they tolerated each other. The wife found out that he had spent \$2000 on a kit that was late in delivery be-

cause of a vendor problem. "This could cost me my marriage," the builder said, "and I need her salary to pay for the kit!" Nothing was said about losing the wife. As it turned out, Scott says, the wife lost her job when the textile plant closed. "The builder sold the Falco project because he didn't have the money to finish it. As far as I know, the couple is still married."

"One Falco builder," Scott says, "now on his second marriage, talks about building another Falco simply because his first marriage got into trouble when he was off fooling with the airplane and wasn't at home in the shop. He wouldn't mind having another airplane to keep him busy at home."

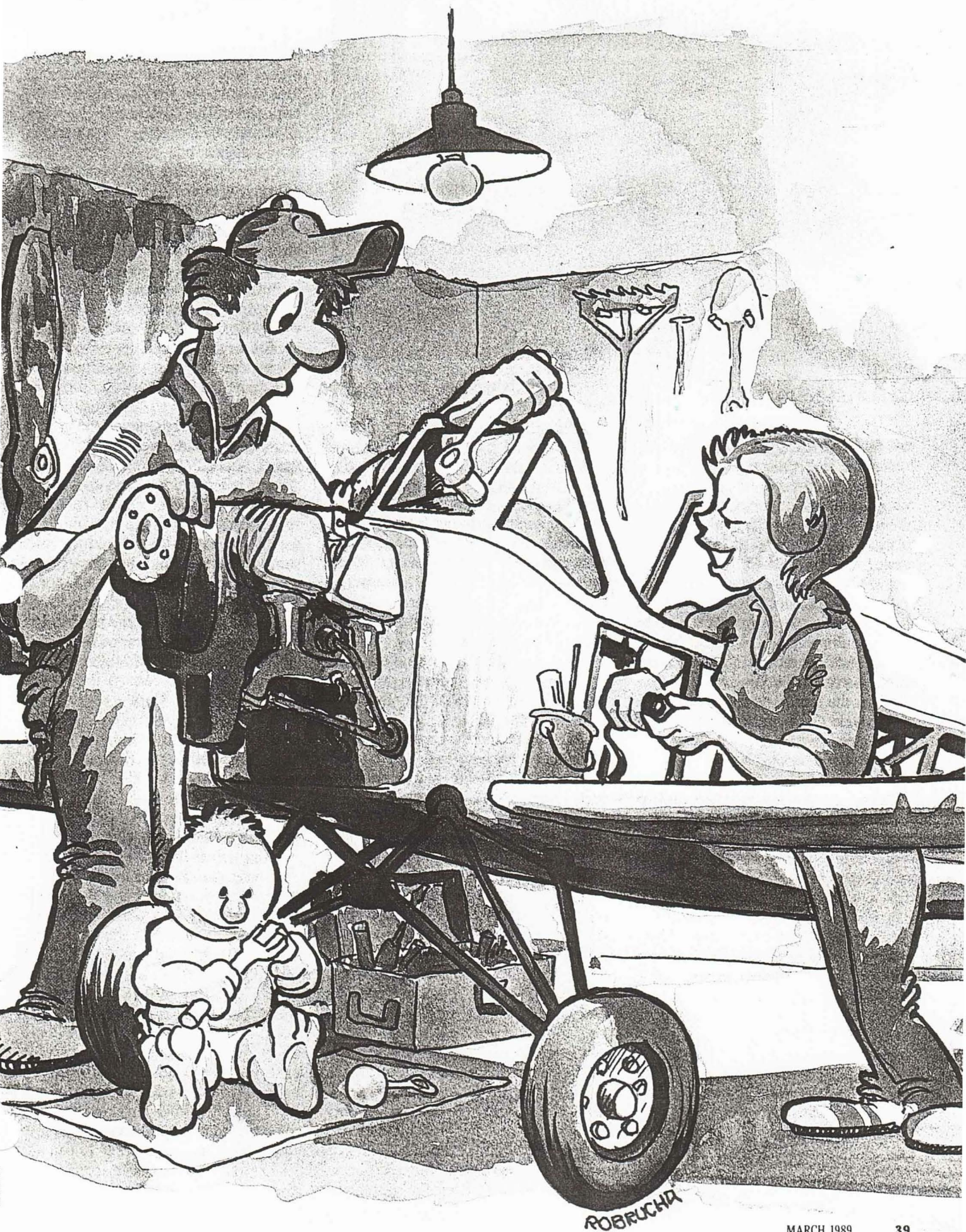
"For the most part," Scott concluded, "I can report that most wives of Falco builders recognize that this is a men-and-machine thing and they are happy to have their husbands at home working on an airplane in the garage. They share a sense of accomplishment. There are lots of other ways that men spend their spare time, and working in a shop at home is regarded by most wives as the best of all worlds. If this is a mid-life crisis, better a wood airplane than any of the more common vices!"

Neil D. Bingham is a member of the Salt Lake City EAA chapter whose wife Lynette regularly shares cockpit duties on long cross-country flights. "I was proud of her when she got her private license," he says. "These are powerful bonding agents for a marriage. We are on our third project, having built a successful KR-2, a sweet-flying Baby Lakes and a second Baby Lakes now in flight test. We are busily putting our Glasair II retractable together in our basement shop. The secret is not mysterious—it's involvement!"

Bill D. Tracy of Oxnard, California, reports that while he was building his Lancair, a retired man and his wife stopped by to look at the project. The wife said candidly, "As long as I get everything I want, then he can build the airplane."

"The first aircraft is a little difficult,"









## MARRIAGE

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says Shirley Puffer, Cozy designer Nat Puffer's wife. "It seemed that the men were having a lot more fun than I was, but if it makes Nat happy, I'm happy." She adds, "I'll guarantee that you'll get to know your husband better after one plane has been finished. I preserve the details during building with pictures and a log, and I feel much more confident when it comes to flying after working along with the project." And Shirley Puffer should know. She's been involved with the building of a BD-5, a VariEze, the prototype and plans-built side-by-side Cozy and now the Mark IV four-place version of the Cozy.

"I'm there when Nat needs me around the shop," she says with a smile. "It's good physical exercise and a release from business frustrations for him. Couples should get involved so they can do the project together. I'd recommend strongly that the Mr.-and-Mrs. project be built at home. Sure, I get a little upset when the house is messed up, but I know where he is and I can go out and talk with him when I want to.

"You have to expect rolls of glass cloth under your best bed and aircraft parts resting on the antique furniture, but that's just part of the building process.

"It wasn't all moonlight and roses—in fact darn little! My adventuresome spirit, love of husband and determination to help him succeed also helped make the transition to have it become my project, too. I thought the men of EAA were having a lot more fun than

the women I knew at my work, at church and social worlds."

Shirley Puffer answered a series of question.

**KITPLANES:** What specifically would you advise a wife to do when she first hears that there may be a homebuilt aircraft in her future?

**Puffer:** She should get interested in what her husband is doing and what the children are doing. Of necessity, most women are good managers and can orient and keep everyone's needs going—even her own.

**KITPLANES:** Do you find areas in common with your painting and the airplane design and building? (Puffer is a serious artist.)

**Puffer:** Nat and I are creating at the same time. We help each other with techniques and design and we critique each other. Sometimes we swallow twice but are mostly comfortable with each other's criticism. I admit this didn't happen overnight—as when I tried to help Nat with his first big layup on the VariEze wings. I realized that a shouting match would lead to a big fight. I then gave up helping except when asked, but I did all the errands, helped hold things, critiqued, kept family and social life going. I usually got included in the finishing process and cooked many a meal for EAA helpers who were intensely interested in learning how to build an airplane.

**KITPLANES:** What single event has given you the most pleasure in the four homebuilts you have survived?

**Puffer:** My most satisfying, thrilling event happened when Nat came back from flying the first test flight of Cozy 22CZ and he was grinning from ear to

Mary Pettit met husband Charles 12 years ago at an airport. An aspiring pilot herself, she helps with the family Bakeng Duce project.

ear, and I knew he had a good airplane! Another thrill was when Nat took me up for the first time in the back seat of the VariEze N2NP. I yelled all the way to altitude—it was wonderful. I was hooked—my first experience at flying in a fast, high-performance military-type airplane.

**KITPLANES:** Aside from EAAers, what do your married friends, particularly the wives, think about a home-built project?

**Puffer:** Married friends are in awe; some are glad they don't have to do what I do; they don't understand it at all. EAA types are different. Women of my generation mostly stay home but will come to Oshkosh to camp. The young women seem to leap into the projects immediately, doing the layups, learning to fly . . . as enthusiastically as their husbands. My hat is off to them!"

Here is Nat's side of the story.

"I worked on the VariEze in all my spare time," he says. "Shirley and I still took family vacations. I had to travel some on business and we were active in church choir and Council. But I kept at it and finished the VariEze in 18 months. We were among the first few with a VariEze to appear at Oshkosh."

The side-by-side Cozy followed. Nat continues, "There came a time a few years ago when Shirley really complained that I spent too much time on my hobby. Knowing that she was an artist and used to paint, I said, 'Well, why don't you get involved with a hobby, too?' So she enrolled in some classes, joined the Old Town Painters group in St. Paul and started going on painting trips. She made new friends that way, so we had both airplane friends and painting friends.

"When we moved to Mesa, Arizona, I wanted to build a shop and she wanted me to build her a studio. She insisted that her studio be exactly the same size as my shop. So she got 400 square feet and so did I. We put folding doors in the dividing wall so we could either open it up into one big room or close it off, depending on how we felt and what we were doing.

"Shirley considers airplane building to be my hobby, but she never hesitates to come to my assistance if I need another pair of hands. She receives airplane friends with open arms and entertains them graciously. At fly-ins,



she loves to meet people and talk with them about airplane building. Here at home, she has spent a lot of time in the office keeping records and books. She loves to fly and even though bad weather scares her, she doesn't let on most of the time. I couldn't ask for more."

When you ring the phone at HAPI Engines in Eloy, Arizona, you'll probably be talking with Phyllis Taylor who, with husband Rex and other family members, runs the business. Phyllis Taylor has a reputation for being feisty. Here are some of her thoughts on our subject.

"I take about 90% of all the calls that come to the shop," Taylor says. "The three most-asked questions are, 'How difficult is it to build an airplane or an engine?' 'How much will it cost?' and 'How many hours will it take to complete the project?'"

"The first two questions have answers that vary depending on the skills of the person asking the question and what's left over to spend. The third question I usually answer with a couple of questions of my own. How old are you? Are you married? Do you have children at home? Do you have a workshop at home or will you have to go to an airport to work?"

"These may seem like nosy questions when all the caller asked was how many hours will it take to complete the project, but they are important to the answer. No matter how much you would like to have 48-hour days, it won't happen. Each day has only 24 hours to be divided between a wife, family, job, yourself and the project.

"In the past 37 or so years, I've raised six children, run a large busy house and spent many hours as a model airplane or experimental airplane widow. I have run the gauntlet from total neglect to working my fingers to the bone rib-stitching the wings and tail feathers of an S2 Pitts. I have roasted or frozen on flight lines all

Shirley and Nat Puffer's marriage has thrived on a number of homebuilt projects including the Cozy, which Nat designed.

over the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand, with and without children.

"All this experience helped equip me to answer the question, 'How long will it take to build a project?' Men develop a severe case of tunnel vision when it comes to their current passions, and far too often their wives and children become airport widows and orphans. At fly-ins, you sometimes see on the information card wrapped around the prop, 'Cost of building this airplane: . . . two wives! It gives a laugh or two, but it hits too close to home for a lot of builders.

"If the potential builder is between 25 and 40 with wife and 2.2 children, statistically speaking, gainfully employed with mortgage, cars and all the etceteras, the project will most generally take from 2 to 3 years. At this point, you hear a gulp and then the question, 'That long? The information packs say I can build this airplane in X amount of hours.'

"The number of hours quoted is pretty close to the amount of time required, but experience has shown these hours will be spread over the better part of 2 or 3 years. At this point, I tell the caller, 'Yes, you might be able to build the airplane by compressing the number of hours in 6 or 8 months, but the cost of building could be your wife and family!'"

"We've been selling plans for three different designs for the past 10 years and experience has shown that the project, except in rare cases, doesn't go as fast as you want. Every 1-hour job takes a week.

"Working, swapping lies with the guys, reading the current issue of **KITPLANES** and finishing just one



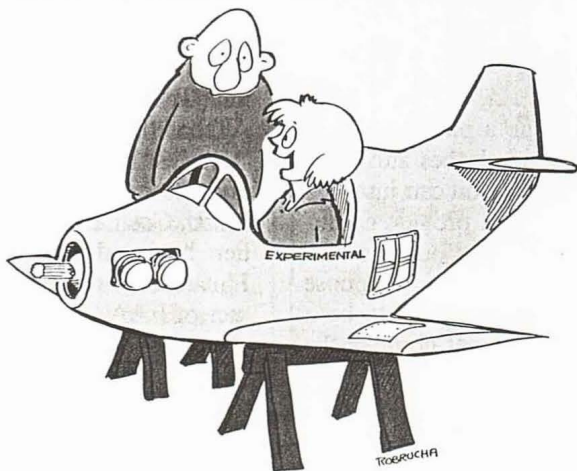
more little job takes an awful lot of time. If your workshop is at home, your wife can bring you a cup of coffee and see your smiling face now and then. If your shop is at the airport and your wife is not enthusiastic about your project, forget it—you won't finish it.

"I point out to the caller that, in case he had never noticed, women are different from men! Honest. They are not in the least reasonable about a lot of things, including your airplane. Go read the fine print in your marriage license. She promised to love and honor you, but she never promised you logic or consistency.

"Don't make her play second fiddle to your airplane. Make room in your schedule for her a couple times a week; take her out to dinner now and then to some place other than the Golden Arches and get her involved. Be a team in every possible way.

"It is possible to combine building an airplane and marriage. It just takes effort," Phyllis Taylor concludes.

You research a magazine article like this in the darndest places. When we tied down the Cardinal and put up our 7-foot Super Dome tent at Oshkosh this past year, our next-plane neighbors were Ray and Sue Lewis of Dallas. They were flying a Cessna 172, but we soon heard that there was a Glasair RG abuilding in the family garage. The couple had been married for 23 years, but Sue Lewis admits that she didn't like any airplanes as recently as 3 years



Robrucha

"Hey! I could really get to like this, but where are you going to sit?"



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ago. It was with much trepidation that she joined in a trip to Oshkosh and took one of Charlene Falkenberg's "Flying Companion" courses.

"I've been very supportive," she says, gritting her teeth. "but I was terrified of little airplanes. My background was raising a family (two boys, 17 and 18) and working with various women's groups. Now I help do layups, measure things and keep the progress photo album for our Glasair."

Lewis took an AOPA Pinch Hitter course and then a few more lessons to solo. Now she has a private license and is heading a local Ninety-Nines committee. Ray Lewis says, "The highlight of the trip to Oshkosh was to see Sue's face when she was lined up number one beside a beautiful warbird on Runway 18. As the flagman waived her clearance for takeoff, I knew that all the work Sue put in to get her new license was worth the effort. I have never been more proud of her and our joint hobby."

The Lewis family C-172, now on a leaseback arrangement, was purchased originally so that Sue could get her private license and Ray could get his instrument rating. He began flying in college as a member of the Long Horn Flying Club in Austin. After graduation, he was away from aviation for 10 years.

When Ray Lewis decided to start a homebuilt, he took his wife on a flying trip to the Stoddard-Hamilton plant in Arlington, Washington, for a first-hand look at the Glasair kit line and what would be taking place. "I had begun to get the hint that Ray had fallen in love with this new mistress," Sue explains. "I thought it was neat—honestly, that he would take on such an extensive commitment."

"I think this is going to be fun. We'll sell the -172 and use the Glasair when it is flying. I advise other wives not to push it when their husbands decide on a homebuilt project. I would suggest they get involved in any way they choose and become a part of it. You can put on your old clothes and learn to lay up fiberglass or you can just help with the planning and provide enthusiastic support. But building an airplane is too big a project for the spouse to remain neutral. There's gotta be a balance. We're building at home in the garage. When the ship nears completion, it will go to a hangar at Addison Airport, just a quarter mile away."



**Ray and Sue Lewis will sell their Cessna 172 and arrive at Oshkosh in their Glasair one of these years.**

Ray Lewis comments that at Oshkosh they went to the Glasair banquet. "There were about 200 of the most enthusiastic people you ever saw. Manufacturer support has been excellent."

We asked Lewis what he has given up to work on his homebuilt. He thought a moment and said, "I drive a 1978 car and I like it. I'm putting the new car money into the airplane."

The couple's two boys think that having an airplane project in the garage is the greatest thing going, but neither son is deeply involved. "There's 'Frank's rib' marked inside the wing," says Ray. "He made it. In fact, we've all done at least one rib. The boys bring their friends by to look at the parts and 'their' ribs."

"This is a first-time project for the Lewis family. It's about one-third finished, but we feel we have gained a lot of confidence and knowledge that will make the middle part go more quickly. We will have to wait to comment on the engine and panel. We are planning a trip to the Canadian Rockies and maybe Alaska around our 25th wedding anniversary in 1991," Ray Lewis says.

Marian Cosman was at an EAA fly-in at Tremonten, Utah, a few years ago. At that time, she described herself as "... just tagging along, wiping noses and bottoms." In the 2 years that followed, Cosman learned to fly, soloed in her husband Michael's single-place Flut-R-Bug and is now secretary/treasurer of EAA Chapter 762. She's raising seven children, ages 3 to 19, and has been involved in three planes under construction, one built (Stits Flut-R-Bug SA-6B) plus an old 1957 Cessna



172 “. . . for me to fly to visit the other set of grandparents. I would like to take the 'Bug; it is much less expensive to fly, but it doesn't have an impulse mag so it is difficult for me to start,” Marian says.

One of the Cosman family projects is to build a design for Michael's father, who was a B-17 pilot and WW-II instructor. “My father-in-law was very impressed not only with our procedure with the composite plane,” Marian explains, “but also with the low cost of being able to get back into flying.”

Marian Cosman continues, “We work on Dad's plane even when he is not here. Mike just finished the wing fillets. I help when called or take out my crocheting and visit while he works, trying to absorb the ideas or work out problems for our four teenagers and also the other three children. We're busy every day from 6:30 in the morning to 11 or 12 at night. We also like to take a walk together every day and, of course, it is down the flight line at the local airport.”

Marian notes that “The project can be an adversary, but you can control whether it is or not. There is too little time in this life to make enemies, even of airplanes. . . .”

She offers some advice for the homebuilder's family. “Realize that few men get to start on their dreams in this life. Even fewer have the support of their families. Get in and learn with him. Don't make him have to go to someone else to ‘talk airplanes’ and thereby lose some of his friendship. Life will not be the same after either of you start flying. Learn the difference.

“When people start flying, they don't feel the same about themselves or the people around them. And because of these feelings, the plane that is being born in the garage is just as life-changing as having a baby added to the house.”

The Cosmans are truly a flying family. Among the licensed pilots are Grandpa, Michael, Marian and a brother-in-law. The teenagers are student pilots and even Jonny, age 4, loves to fly to Grandma and Grandpa's house. “I would rather have them flying than in a car—it's safer,” Marian says. “It teaches them discipline of their bodies and minds. It sets them apart from the run of the crowd.”

Our love-seat approach to marriage and the homebuilt merely touches on the fringes of the subject. If you have thoughts to share with our readers, drop a note to the “Letters to the Editor.” □